

**WE HAVE NO QUESTION MARKS
—OR—
TO KNOW WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW
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**Exodus 33:17-23
John 18:33-38**

**“You shall see my back;
but my face shall not be seen.”
Exodus 33:23 (NRSV)**

*Dear God, we come here this morning to be with you,
to sit together in your presence,
and to listen together for the word you have for us.
We are here to begin together our Lenten journey,
walking with your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, on the way to his cross.
Bless us. Silence in us any voice but your own and help us to know again
the power of your redeeming love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

“We have no question marks.” Leszek Pytka, our building manager, said that. It was a month ago. I had decided to preach about the question that was on everybody’s heart and mind in the aftermath of the tragic tsunami in Southeast Asia. “Where was God?” The question was all over the media. Reporters were calling clergy for statements. So I decided to do something we do not ordinarily do around here, namely put the sermon title on the bulletin boards outside: “Where Is God When Disaster Strikes?” Walking past the church, however, I noticed that the question mark was missing. Not wanting to be guilty of a punctuation faux pas in such a public way, I contacted the real authorities around here and suggested that the title needed a question mark. That is when Leszek Pytka came to my study, stuck his head in the door, and said, “Dr. Buchanan, I am sorry but we have no question marks.” Apparently our set of little white letters that provides bulletin board information doesn’t include question marks. But Leszek understood and told me he would fix it, and did, by somehow making three perfectly adequate question marks. And I thought, I have a sermon title.

Wouldn’t it be nice if it were that simple—life with no question marks, life lived securely within an envelope of absolute certainty? We begin life that way, with truth given to us, imposed on us by benevolent, loving parents. For a while, at least, God is in heaven and all is right with the world, and it has been suggested that longing for that certainty, the security of life

without question marks, is with us as long as we live. It is further suggested that when we live in uncertain, dangerous, unpredictable times, religion is one of the places we look for that lost certainty. And so, not surprisingly, religion often speaks and acts as if it knows the truth, a lot of truth, with an authoritarian aura of absolute certainty. And that is precisely when things start to go wrong.

Professor Anna Case Winters, who teaches theology at McCormick Seminary, tells about a revelation she experienced in conversation with an official from the World Bank. The woman was organizing a World Bank dialogue on ethics and values and wanted to invite religious leaders to participate. She was overruled. She was told by her superiors that religious leaders would not be helpful. Religion is defunct and “where religion still has influence it is divisive and even dangerous.” Unfortunately, Professor Winters concludes, “these charges are not without foundation. . . . Jonathan Swift’s acid observation is to the point: ‘We have just enough religion to make us hate one another—but not enough to make us love one another’” (Anna Case Winters, *God Alone Is God*).

Now it is terribly easy here to be critical of others, to point accusative fingers at people whose theology and ecclesiology is different from ours, those people who are so sure of themselves, and to wrap ourselves round with the mantle of liberality and open-mindedness. So let me be clear at the outset: the temptation to embrace our own certainties and to live life without question marks falls equally on all of us—liberals and conservatives; mainliners and evangelicals; Protestants and Catholics; Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

So, back to a basic question: How do we know truth? How do we know what we know? The name for it is epistemology, the study of the nature and limits of human knowledge. *Epistemology*: one of those wonderful words you learn in divinity school and never get to use again, particularly not in sermons—and I have done it, two weeks in a row. How do we know what we know? It’s an important question. For several centuries we Westerners, children of the Enlightenment, have placed our bets on human reason. It is true if you can see it, touch, feel, smell, weigh, analyze it. Human reason, common sense, defines truth. Truth is H₂O, which is always water. Truth, someone said, is a Concert A, which is the same, always and everywhere. But science itself is now questioning the certainty that derives from reason alone. Maybe there is another way of knowing that is not contrary to human reason but above, beyond, below, deeper than reason alone.

Poets, artists, know about this knowing, this way of knowing that might be called the wisdom or truth of the heart.

What gets in the way, of course, is our tendency to be absolutely sure we know the truth.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, at a briefing a few months after 9/11, attempted to get at it and in the process earned some good-natured ribbing, including a parody in a poetry journal. But what he said is important.

There are known knowns,
things we know we know.
There are known unknowns,
that is we know there are some things we do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know."
(DOD Briefing, 2/12/02)

When the topic is military intelligence and national security, it is absolutely essential to know that there are things you do not know. Secretary Rumsfeld was absolutely on target. He was also being a good systematic theologian.

In an article she wrote for the *Christian Century*, Barbara Brown Taylor referred to a theologian who lived five centuries ago, Nicholas of Cusa, whose big contribution to theology was the notion he called "Learned Ignorance."

Nicholas of Cusa wrote, "God is the unknown infinite who dwells in light inaccessible and so God's greatest gift to us is 'to know that we do not know.' Nothing more perfect comes to a person," he said.

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes,

In Nicholas's scheme, the dumbest people in the world are those who think they know. Their certainty about what is true not only pits them against each other, it also prevents them from learning anything new. That is truly dangerous knowledge. They do not know that they do not know and their unlearned ignorance keeps them in the dark about most of the things that matter. . . . To know that you do not know is the beginning of wisdom." (*The Christian Century*, 1 June 2001)

Wouldn't it be something if religious leaders everywhere joined hands in a confession of learned ignorance, a humble, graceful act of theological modesty before the infinite mystery that is God— if popes, Dalai Lamas, chief rabbis, televangelists, imams, archbishops, moderators, district superintendents, bishops joined hands and promised to reexamine their

certainties about those exclusive truth claims that divide and sometimes turn violent? Wouldn't it be something to see if Christians stopped using their truth as a weapon against other Christians? Wouldn't it be something to see if we Christians stopped saying, "Thus saith the Lord" and instead learned to say "It is our opinion that . . ."? Wouldn't it be something if just the world's Christians let go of certainty about the mind of God on a whole myriad of issues like gay marriage, gay/lesbian ordination, abortion, stem cell research, and whether SpongeBob SquarePants is pushing a subversive agenda by teaching tolerance of diversity by holding hands with a star fish—all of the issues that divide us—and simply learned to say—instead of "we know"—"we think," "it is our considered opinion that," "we suggest for your consideration"?

Deep in our faith tradition is an intentional modesty before the mystery of God, a clear confession that we know what we do not know. We left Moses on the misty, cloudy mountain last Sunday. After their miraculous escape from the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea, Moses is leading the tribes of Israel through the wilderness of Sinai. God summons Moses to the mountain, Mount Sinai. Moses expects to see God, but a cloud descends. Moses can't see at all.

This week he's back up on the mountain again. In the meantime God gave Moses the law, the Ten Commandments. When Moses came down from the mountain, he discovered the people worshipping a golden calf. In a fit of rage, Moses smashed the tablets. But now he's back. God has forgiven. The law will be given again. The broken covenant between God and the people is restored. And at this very moment Moses makes a perfectly reasonable request of God: "A little concrete evidence please? A little confirmation that I'm on the right track here, that all this is not a figment of my imagination. Help me to know for sure that you are for real and not, as some have suggested, just a projection of my own fears and insecurities."

A voice from the cloud says, "I will make my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, but you cannot see my face."

There are some things Moses, you, we cannot know. As St. Augustine noted, "If you understand, it is not God."

And then, in this ancient and wonderful story, God says the most amazing thing to Moses: "There is a place by me where you can stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

It is such a reasonable request, such a familiar question: just a little empirical evidence, just a little something to hold on to, to assure me that

this is true and that I'm not making a complete fool of myself by believing in you and trusting you as I walk into this wilderness, just some proof that I'm not wasting my time trying to be faithful to you, that I'm not being naïve trying to be honest and fair and loving and genuine. It is such a familiar request. All we want, after all, is a little certainty.

But apparently what God has in mind, what God wants, is not certainty but faith, life lived not on the basis of a list of absolutely true maxims or rules that keep getting us into trouble and starting fights among us about whose truth is the real truth, but a life of faithful trusting, a life of prayerful inquiry, a lifelong quest for truth that will never be complete until that day when we no longer see through a glass, dimly, but face to face. Maybe God wants us to keep our question marks handy.

There is a lot about truth in the Fourth Gospel.

"And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

"I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6)

"You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32)

And finally, near the end, Jesus has been arrested by the Romans and is being questioned by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who will decide his fate.

"Are you a king?" Pilate asks, and Jesus answers: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

And Pilate asks: "What is truth?"

It is, of course, the best question in all of history. It is the question that lies beneath the faith journey of every single one of us, regardless of how we express it.

The great theologian Paul Tillich said that the drive for truth is deep within every one of us, the lifelong search for something to hold on to and live by.

"In the depth of every serious doubt and every despair of truth, the passion for truth is still at work. Don't give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth." (*The New Being: What Is Truth?*, p. 67)

What Christianity offers is this: That man, Jesus, is truth; not words about him, not doctrines that attempt to explain him, not churches that use his name, not ecclesiastical authorities that claim to speak and act for him, but him. He, himself, is the truth.

What does that mean? Paul Tillich said, after a lifetime of working toward a true expression of the truth that is Christ, "If Jesus says, 'I am the truth,' he indicates that in him, the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present; or in other words, that God is present, unveiled, understood, in his infinite depth" (Ibid., p. 69).

At the end, Jesus is our truth. And if we hold to him, if we listen to him because he is truth, we will not use our religion to exclude others, because he did not. Because he is our truth, we will never use our religion to judge other, because he did not. Because he is the truth, we will do everything we can to forgive and accept and extend compassion to our neighbors, because he did and because he told us to. Because he is the truth, we can never arrogantly claim that our truth is the whole truth, the only truth, because he did not, because he told us that he has sheep that are not in his fold.

Jesus is our truth and we follow him "by faith and not by sight."

There is truth that we know more deeply than our minds, our reason. It is truth of the heart, what poet Wendell Berry calls "knowing by cherishing, . . . knowing by affection, knowing by heart." The best part of life is like that. You can't, after all, understand love with your mind alone. You can't reduce your love for another—for your spouse, your beloved, your children, your parents—to a formula. I'd be hard pressed to prove the dearest, most precious, most cherished parts of my life. But I'm willing to bet my life on them.

You know love by remembering and cherishing and, as the poet observed, by the singing that is in your heart.

It is Lent, and we follow one on a journey of the heart these six weeks. He, who is our truth, set aside reason and listened to his heart. It was not reasonable to leave Galilee and go to Jerusalem. It was not good common sense to expose himself to danger. It was not rational to go to the very place where he could be arrested and tried and crucified.

But that is what he did—set aside reason and listened to his heart, and acted in the purity and wholeness and passion of his love.

And that is how he summons you to live your life and me to live my life.

I loved learning that *credo*, the Latin word from which we get “creed,” the Apostles’ Creed, actually comes from the Latin word for heart, *corda*. So when we say I believe—“I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,” we are not saying that we know this in our minds but in our hearts, where we know the truth of love. To say “I believe” is not to say “I know” in the same way that “I know this is Sunday and the sandwich is chicken salad and the hymnbook I am holding is blue and has 716 pages.” No, it is to say, I turn my heart to God and to God’s Son Jesus Christ. I give my heart to this one.

He, Jesus Christ, is truth, and until that day when we see clearly, to know him is to know the truth in which there is perfect freedom and safety and wholeness and life abundant.

All praise to him.